

## *Freedom, Conditioned & Not*

*June 11, 2015*

There are only two teachings that the Buddha lists as categorical, meaning that they're true across the board in all situations for everyone. One is the four noble truths, and the other is the principle that skillful actions should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. In fact, you can derive the four noble truths from that second categorical teaching. Craving should be abandoned; the path should be developed, so as to comprehend suffering and then attain its cessation. So in that case, the craving is the unskillful action and the path is the skillful one.

There's another passage where one of the Buddha's lay follower is being accosted by some members of another sect. They ask him, "Does your teacher teach that the world is eternal or not?" – "No, neither one." "How about if it's finite or infinite?" – "No, he doesn't address that one, either." "How about if the soul is the same thing as the body or different?" – "Nope." "How about an arahant after death: Does he exist, non-exist, both, neither?" "The Buddha doesn't address any of those issues." So the people say, "Your teacher doesn't teach anything." Apparently, those were the hot issues of the day. But the Buddha's follower says, "No, there's one thing he teaches: He teaches that skillful actions should be developed and unskillful ones abandoned." That principle was the Buddha's central teaching. Afterward, the follower went to tell the Buddha about the conversation, and the Buddha affirmed what he had said.

So as we're sitting here meditating, it's important that we have a sense of what we're doing right now, whether it's skillful, whether it's not, realizing that we always have the choice: You can either abandon skillful actions or you can develop them; you can abandon unskillful ones or you can develop them. And the Buddha's recommendation, of course, is to develop the skillful ones and abandon the ones that are not.

It's happened many times, though, that I've been teaching retreats – it happened here in the States and it happened recently in France – when the question gets posed: "This obsession with the minutiae of your little actions, isn't that getting in the way of realizing the oneness that's around us all the time? Why don't we just let go of questions of right and wrong open to the oneness?"

There is oneness. The questions, of course, is what kind of oneness is that? It's an idea; it's a perception. And how reliable is that perception? You can apply oneness to all kinds of things. But as the Buddha pointed out, even the highest state of oneness of non-duality is fabricated. There a state where there's the oneness of consciousness, a sense of your awareness being one with the object. But that's fabricated and it's going to let you down.

Even more so when you just slap the label of oneness on everything without really knowing what you're doing. After all, there is a choice – you can choose to use that label or not. And you have to ask yourself, “Why are you using that label? Is it skillful? What are you trying to avoid?” There are a lot of areas of life where dualities really do matter. When you're having your brain operated on, you want the surgeon to know which part of your brain is the left brain and which part is right, which knife to pick up and which knife not to pick up.

And of course the issue of suffering places a lot of dualities on you right here and now. Suffering is different from not suffering; the cause of suffering is different from the cause of not suffering. Unless you're totally dead, you're going to prefer not suffering. So the fact of suffering forces dualities on us. And as the Buddha points out, it all comes down to our actions: Some actions lead to suffering, and some to its cessation. That's why he taught a path of action, and said that its factors are right.

There's something very unusual in the path, which is that it's based on the principle that your present experience is composed of results of past actions, your current actions—i.e. your current intentions—and the results of current intentions, all fitted together. Your present actions take the potentials from past actions and turn them into what you're experiencing right now—as when you're choosing to stay with the breath.

The fact that you've chosen to stay with the breath changes the breath right there. If you do it right, there's going to be a sense of ease that comes with the act of paying attention to the breath.

The important thing in all of this is that your current actions don't have to be influenced by your past ones. There is some freedom of choice here. How that happens, the Buddha doesn't explain; where it comes from, he doesn't explain. But if in practice you pursue this relative level of freedom you have right now—and follow it carefully enough and consistently enough—it will take you to a bigger kind of freedom, i.e., the freedom of the unconditioned.

So these little choices you're making here are not little. We're zeroing in on something that's really important: this potential for freedom right here, right now, and how to make the most of it. Most people don't make the most of their freedom of choice. They just go along with old habits, put everything on automatic pilot, and direct their attention some place else.

But if you want freedom, you have to turn around and look, “What are you choosing right now? Why are you choosing it? What do you expect the results will be?” This is the series of questions that the Buddha posed to his son. When the Buddha was teaching his son, he wasn't the kind of teacher who would give just elementary but not very insightful lessons to the kids. He wanted the kid to start off on the right foot, right from the very beginning. So he focused on actions, your intentions. What do you expect to happen as the result of your actions? And then you check: Did you actually get the result you wanted? If not, you can change. Keep

circling around these choices you have right now, and your sensitivity as to what's skillful and what's not will develop.

For instance, when the Buddha himself was getting on the right path, he divided his thoughts into two kinds: thoughts imbued with sensuality, ill-will, and harmfulness on one side; and those that were free of sensuality—in other words, dealing with renunciation—free from ill-will, free from harmfulness on the other side. Then he watched his mind. When it was going to the harmful side, he kept it in check; when it was going to the more skillful side, he let it wander as it liked. He kept an eye on it, though, making sure that it didn't wander too far astray. But then he began to realize that you can think skillful thoughts all day long, and there may not be any bad karmic consequences, but it is tiring to the mind. So it's even more skillful to get the mind into concentration.

When you're in the various levels of concentration, getting the mind deeper and deeper into absorption, the level of skill becomes more refined. You begin to notice that certain perceptions weigh on the mind; even the perceptions that keep you in concentration can be a weight. You learn to let those go. And you get deeper and deeper into concentration. As with any skill, you learn to do it more and more efficiently – quicker at getting the mind to settle down, more efficient at getting it to stay there, with a minimum amount of effort. But there's always going to be some effort in the concentration.

At this level, the Buddha doesn't call it stress or suffering, but there is a very subtle level of stress; he calls it disturbance. And so you circle around that: your choice to focus on one perception rather than another. There comes a point, though, where it's not getting into deeper concentration, and you begin to realize that the fact that you're making a choice, and that no matter what the choice is going to be, it's going to involve stress of some kind, more or less refined. And if everything is in balance at that point, there comes an opening. You realize that there's another alternative, which is that you don't have to make a choice. And in not making the choice, you're freed from the present moment, because your present choices were what made the present moment. When you can drop them, that's how you reach the ultimate freedom, the unconditioned freedom.

So unconditioned freedom is found by focusing on the freedom we have to make choices here and now. We have some freedom in choosing our actions. We want to learn to be more and more sensitive, more and more skillful around that possibility. In this way, this conditioned freedom takes us, if we follow the noble eightfold path, to the unconditioned freedom.

One of the questions I was asked in France was whether the unconditioned freedom was what explains the conditioned freedom. And there the answer has to be, No. Unconditioned freedom doesn't cause anything; it's not a foundation or a ground for anything; it's not the source of anything. It's simply that the path takes you there—this path of focusing on the

question of whether what you're going to do right now is skillful or not. That's what takes you to the threshold of that freedom.

One person kept pursuing this question again and again, and I finally found out why. He had been listening to a teacher in another tradition who had said that unconditioned freedom is the foundation for everything we do right now; it's where everything comes from and everything returns. And this person observed—quite rightly—that if everything comes from unconditioned freedom, then when you reach unconditioned freedom, what's to prevent you from coming back out again? Is there no once-and-for-all kind of freedom? If unconditioned freedom were the source of things, there would be no escape, there would be no final release from suffering.

But here, unconditioned freedom is not the cause of anything at all. It's totally separate from causes. You find it by exploring your present causes. But there is a leap; a disconnect. Still, by pursuing this supposedly minor issue of the fact that you can choose to be skillful or not in your choices right now, actually takes you to something really big: a freedom once and for all, which you can't find any other way. So make the most of the freedom you've got now, and it will take you to a freedom that's bigger than anything you can imagine.